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# Nice White men or social justice allies?: Using critical race theory to examine how White male faculty and administrators engage in ally work

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## Abstract

Numerous scholars have offered definitions and perspectives for White people to be or become social justice allies. The purpose of this study was to examine the complicated realities that social justice allies in higher education face when working on campus. Using a critical interpretivist approach grounded in critical race theory, the authors interpret participants' constructions of allies and ally work and draw larger implications for these constructions and their capacity to disrupt and uphold systems of oppression and injustice. In examining the experiences of White male faculty and administrators who shared how they constructed and made meaning of the complexities embedded in ally work, we found that participants situated ally work at individual, rather than institutional levels. Findings also revealed the paradox of engaging in ally work, which involved few risks and sacrifices, but greater rewards for being perceived as “good” people. Finally, ally work was viewed as aspirational for the participants. Recommendations for future research and scholarship are offered.

**Keywords:** white men, social justice allies, critical race theory, higher education

A number of scholars (Eichstedt 2001; Kivel 2002; Levine 2003) have offered definitions and perspectives on what it means for white people to be social justice allies. In *Developing Social Justice Allies*, a monograph authored by Reason, Broido, Davis, and Evans (2005, 1), the authors share, “Allies have action-oriented identities ... they have their feet in the worlds of both the dominant and the oppressed ... they need to continually and accurately judge when it is most appropriate ... to listen, to speak up, or to absent the discussion ....” They further contend ally work requires incorporation of personal histories and complex identities. The bottom line that allies must negotiate is, “What right do I have to do this work?” (Reason et al.

2005, 1). This question is telling in light of political activist and lecturer, Ewuare Xola Osayande's (2010) commentary, *Word to the Wise: Unpacking the White Privilege of Tim Wise*, Osayande offers a thought-provoking critique of Tim Wise, and other white anti-racist educators. Osayande (para. 9–11) expresses three privileges these individuals possess:

- (1) the ability to paraphrase and/or otherwise exploit the analysis of black liberation struggle and have it received by others as though it were their own.
- (2) the ability to emotionally express their views about racism without having that expression dismissed as “angry” or “too emotional.”
- (3) being honored for their anti-racist work as their black activist counterparts and other activists of color are denounced and derided.

These privileges reveal the difficulties and contradictions associated with ally work, among them being how individuals consciously or unconsciously position themselves as allies, how individuals are named as allies, to whom the benefits accrue as a result of engaging in perceived ally work, and implications for those populations to whom one is an ally. Most important perhaps is not simply that allies ask the question “What right do I have to do this work?,” but *how* they answer it.

This study examines the complicated realities encountered by white men who were perceived to be social justice allies in higher education. We examined experiences of white male faculty and administrators, identified by others as social justice allies, who shared their constructions of the complexities of ally work. Using concepts from critical race theory (CRT) to answer our research questions, we asked: (1) How do white men construct the role of being an ally?; and (2) What complexities emerge for white men as they aspire to ally work?

### **Understanding allies and ally work**

We argue that allies are people who work for social justice from positions of dominance, such as heterosexuals working toward social justice in support of gay, lesbian and bisexual people or Christians involved with Muslim students working to secure spaces across campus for daily prayers. Thus, dominant group membership is inherently connected to allyship.

Engaging in ally work is ongoing, requiring continual reflection, and perseverance. It involves moving beyond words toward actions that disrupt oppressive structures and understanding one's positionality in oppression. Allies are positioned to call attention to issues but should understand how their day-to-day actions, behaviors, and attitudes, resist or perpetuate inequity (Reason and Broido 2005).

Manning (2009, 17) argues, "Many educators claim [the position of social justice] yet have an incomplete understanding of its full meaning." This is absolutely possible since higher education has developed elusive discourses around difference. If institutions lack clear articulations of diversity and equity, are individuals within these settings equally unclear about their roles as allies?

Scholars have written about the complicated nature of social justice work (Brandon 2003; Eichstedt 2001; Kivel 2002; Thompson 2003). For white people, one complexity involves decentering whiteness, while remaining conscious of racism and white supremacy. However, it is difficult to avoid using dominant standards that likely result in recentering whiteness. Another complication is how they engage in social justice projects. White allies tend to direct others, take leadership and focus on self, rather than listening to and partnering with nondominant populations (Crowfoot and Chesler 2003; Hytten and Warren 2003). They (mis)handle feelings of guilt (see "guilty white liberal" in Tatum [2003]; and "white guilt" in Steele [2002]), and want to be perceived as "good" white people (Edwards 2006). Thompson (2003, 9) asserted, "The desire to be and be known as a good white person stems from the recognition that our whiteness is problematic, a recognition that we try to escape by being demonstrably different from other, racist whites." Collectively, these issues paralyze and prevent them from focusing more intently on social justice work.

Edwards (2006) model is helpful for understanding social justice allies. Edwards describes three types of aspiring allies: (1) ally for self-interest; (2) ally for altruism; and (3) ally for social justice. Allies for self-interest serve those with whom they have personal relationships, and lack awareness of systemic oppression and their own complicity. Allies for altruism have awareness of white privilege but project oppressive behaviors on other whites. They distance themselves and become defensive when confronted with their own oppressive behaviors. They want to be perceived as the selfless hero to nondominant populations and leave little space for them to develop agency. Allies for social justice recognize the interconnectedness of oppressive structures and work in partnership with marginalized persons toward building social justice coalitions. They aspire to move beyond individual acts and direct attention to oppressive processes and systems. Their pursuit is not merely to *help* oppressed persons but to create a socially just world which benefits all people.

Other writers have discussed what is needed from white allies. First, white allies are encouraged to work with other whites (Kivel 2002; Ignatiev 1997) to build support for anti-racism and to address the reality that whites are more likely to accept difficult messages regarding their perpetuation of white supremacy from another white person. White allies are encouraged to follow the leadership of people of color through coalitions and collaborations (Crowfoot and Chesler 2003).

Overall, they must rewrite the dominant narratives shaping their lives through involvement with engaged communities (Chubbuck 2004).

Positions of dominance are complicated for allies because they not only result in affording individual privileges to allies, but also influence their interactions with people (Bloom and Kilgore 2003; Lawrence and Tatum 2004). Focusing on white men, is relevant because they occupy significant spaces in the academy as college presidents, senior administrators, and faculty (especially full professors), hence, their ability to wield power not experienced by nondominant populations. White men who can explicitly move beyond minimization of oppression, accusations of reverse racism, and acknowledge their complicity in white supremacy are few and far between in the academy because of the benefits they accrue as white men (Cabrera 2014). White men have the most to sacrifice in terms of social justice due to their societal positioning. Leonardo (2004, 137) stated, "The conditions of white supremacy, make white privilege possible." These conditions also contribute to male privilege. While some white men may certainly experience temporary oppression (e.g. having a low socioeconomic status or being gay or bisexual), their whiteness and maleness affords latitude to negotiate and transcend oppressive terrains.

### **Conceptual framework**

We used CRT to interrogate social justice ally work. CRT is useful in examining complexities of privilege and power and problematizing how whiteness impedes social justice work. Using CRT might suggest an isolated focus on racism, but we are concerned about whiteness and white supremacy as "a system of thought that permeates all realms of behavior by people who view the world through its frame" (The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness 2005, 247). bell hooks (1989) shifted from using racism to using white supremacy to describe societal oppression's pervasive impact on all people, particularly well-meaning white people. She stated, "When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism ... they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure or racist domination and oppression that they wish to see eradicated" (113). Similar to hooks, other scholars emphasize the concept of white supremacy to accurately describe the social realities of racism, oppression, and power (Gillborn 2005; Leonardo 2004; Perez Huber et al. 2008; Wildman and Grillo 1991).

CRT, a movement stemming from legal studies, centers the role of power in producing and sustaining racism and hegemony. Critical race theorists believe interactions between people and within organizations are situated in power relationships rooted in white supremacy. CRT relies on assumptions such as the notion that racism is normal and embedded in societal structures and behaviors (Delgado and

Stefancic 2001). The normative nature of racism oftentimes renders it invisible, particularly to white people who are privileged through racism. Thus its insidious nature makes it difficult to recognize, challenge and eradicate. CRT scholars acknowledge the social construction of race and the high value placed upon white identities at the expense of people of color. CRT scholars examine the shifting and differential racialization of people of color based on the needs and desires of racially dominant groups (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Given the positionality of people of color in society, CRT scholarship is geared toward validating their voices by challenging “stock” stories commonly recorded and presented as truth and distributed through power structures grounded in whiteness (Delgado 1989).

CRT is relevant given two ideas posited within this framework: whiteness as property and interest convergence. Harris (1993) explained that historically, whiteness has been constructed as a form of property that receives protection under the law. She stated, “Only white possession and occupation of land was validated and therefore privileged as a basis for property rights” (278). Whiteness was synonymous with citizenship and defined an individual’s personhood. For example, while white people were viewed as individuals and property owners, African Americans were viewed as three-fifths of a person and as property. The blatant laws upon which whiteness rested have been changed or abolished, but their impact remains. One aspect of this legacy is the multifaceted nature of whiteness. At once, whiteness exists as everything and nothing, meaning it encompasses the ultimate form of property but has a presumed invisibility. Whiteness is property that *only* white people (or those perceived to be white) can possess, given the color of their skin. Thus, the culture, language, and behaviors which comprise whiteness are valuable forms of property that are not accessible to those without white skin. Whiteness acts as a personal characteristic or identity *and* an intangible, external domain through which status and privilege are conferred. Harris (1993) identified four property functions of whiteness: (1) the rights to disposition; (2) the rights to use and enjoyment; (3) reputation and status property; and (4) the absolute right to exclude.

Harris (1993) contends that rights to disposition render white people full rights and abilities to transfer whiteness and its associated privileges to others from one generation to the next. The rights to use and enjoyment allow white people to receive the full benefits associated with white privilege. In this regard, whiteness becomes a resource that can be deployed at the leisure of white people. Whiteness also guarantees reputational and status property rights, allowing white people to benefit from being known as white, resulting in the advantages of being perceived as well-intentioned, innocent, and trustworthy people. Additionally, whiteness grants the right to exclude non-white people from espousing a white identity. Several laws were created historically, to enforce who was and who was not white. The rights

to exclusion also occur in physical spaces (e.g. school segregation), organizational memberships, access to information or resources, and overall entitlements from which white people benefit.

Key to understanding Harris' (1993) viewpoint is that whiteness is upheld and protected by law, which ultimately influences policies, behaviors, and cultural practices at colleges and universities. Whiteness as property has implications for understanding allies in higher education and raises some important questions. Does the discussion of allies recenter rather than disrupt whiteness? In what ways does whiteness and reputational rights allow white people to confer the status of ally upon themselves and be perceived as allies, whether their behaviors and attitudes are genuine or not? Does ally work actually serve whiteness and benefit the self-interests of white people? Such questions imply that whiteness, by its sheer nature must reap gains from ally work in order for inequities to be addressed. Bell (1995, 523), refers to this notion as the principle of interest convergence. In discussing the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, Bell stated, "The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites."

Bell (1995) explained that white people have the power to invalidate, or reverse measures for racial justice if they threaten whiteness; thus, the interests of people of color can be easily sacrificed. Despite the injustices enacted upon people of color, they alone are insufficient to gain redress (Bell 2004). Ally work can only commence at the comfort level of white people and whiteness has to be centered before change emerges. Crowfoot and Chesler (2003, 364) identify incentives for white men to get involved in multicultural coalitions, but conclude that "most white male participation leads to maintenance of the ... status quo."

Whiteness as property and interest convergence inform this study by addressing powerful forces embedded in relationships between white people and those marginalized by white people throughout history. Although this study was not focused specifically on white men who were allies to People of Color, we use CRT to highlight the complications of historically invested power dynamics.

## Methodology

A critical interpretivist qualitative methodology was used in this study. Kincheloe and McLaren (2002, 24) note, "qualitative research that frames its purpose in the context of critical theoretical concerns still produces ... undeniably dangerous knowledge ... that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth." We wanted to understand the complexities of ally work and simultaneously upset the notion that by virtue of being a good person, one is also an ally. Our inquiry was also orientational in nature. Patton (2002, 129) stated, "Orientational

qualitative inquiry begins with an explicit theoretical or ideological perspective that determines what conceptual framework will direct the fieldwork and the interpretation of the findings.” Our CRT lens was consistently engaged during this study. We remained cognizant of our own understandings of racism and white supremacy, allowing space to critically elucidate participants’ meaning constructions, as well as problematize and interrogate the notion of allies. This study represents two strands of interpretation, the participants’ interpretation of their experiences, and our interpretation (using a critical race lens) of what participants shared.

### *Participants*

Using an informal nomination process, and criterion sampling techniques, the lead researcher asked several colleagues within the academic fields of higher education and student affairs to identify potential participants for the study (e.g. “Do you know any white men in the field who you would consider to be an ally or who engages in ally work?”). Selection criteria included being white, male, presently working in a college or university as a student affairs administrator or a faculty member in a higher education-related program, and being nominated by at least one colleague who believed they were social justice allies. Fifteen men were invited to participate and 12 agreed. They described themselves as coming from various social classes and geographic locations. None overtly disclosed identifying with any other marginalized groups. Nor did we directly inquire about participants’ identities other than being white men because they had already been identified by someone else as being perceived to be a white male ally qualifying them for participation in this study and indicating that others perceive them to be members of the dominant group. Table 1 provides a participant breakdown.

**Table 1.** Research study participant list.

Pseudonym	Faculty/Administrator	Geographic Location
Alex	Mid-level Administrator	Midwest
Brandon	Professor	West
Bryce	Administrator	Midwest
Chad	Assistant Professor	Southeast
Chip	Associate Professor	Northeast
Dan	Senior Administrator	Midwest
Dylan	Senior Administrator	Midwest
Frank	Associate Professor	South
Jim	Associate Professor	Midwest
Kip	Assistant Professor	Midwest
Larry	Assistant Professor	Midwest
Stuart	Senior Administrator	Midwest



### *Data collection and analysis*

The men participated in a semi-structured interview lasting 60–75 minutes. They were asked questions regarding how they define the term “ally,” whether they would describe themselves as an ally, and types of ally work in which they had been previously/presently engaged. They also described instances that triggered their ally development, how they constructed meaning of and complexities around ally work.

The “data [were] inductively analyzed to identify the recurring patterns or common themes that cut across the data” (Merriam and Associates 2002, 7). The first review of transcripts involved reading line-by-line individually and identifying emergent patterns. We then analyzed the transcripts collectively to ascertain the existence of the patterns. In round three, we reviewed the transcripts to consider the validity of the patterns. Evidence supporting and contradicting the patterns was marked and organized. We met frequently to discuss the emergent themes we noticed and reflected on the research purpose and conceptual framework used to analyze the data. Our analysis yielded a range of patterns that we collapsed into three overarching themes to illuminate how participants constructed meanings associated with being an ally.

### *Subjectivities/positionalities*

The topic of white male allies first caught my (Lori) attention when a graduate student asked, “Can you name any white, heterosexual male allies on campus?” I was immediately intrigued as I conscientiously attempted and failed at identifying someone. I could recall “nice white men,” who held the door open for me while entering the building or spoke to me as our paths crossed, but in my mind they were not allies. As a black woman, I had little expectation for a white man to be an ally, especially behind closed doors where important decisions that could affect me were being made.

Over time, this question resonated as I was unable to identify a critical mass of white men, who were capable of emerging beyond whiteness to resist the benefits of racism and unlearn the social conditioning that fueled their contributions to cycles of oppression. I carried these thoughts from graduate school into a tenured faculty position and spent time reflecting on my positionality in terms of privilege (educated, Christian, middle-class, heterosexual, etc.) and oppression (African American, woman). I have examined the ways in which I aspire to engage in ally work with and under the leadership of those who are in nondominant positions where I am privileged. I was conscious of how whiteness could be recentered and well aware of the political ramifications of this study. Ahmed (2004, section 2) captured how I ultimately approached this work and what I hope to succeed in doing. She stated, “To study whiteness, as a racialised position, is hence already

to contest its dominance, how it functions as a mythical norm. Whiteness studies makes that which is invisible visible, though for nonwhites, the project has to be described differently: it would be about making what can already be seen, visible in a different way.”

I (Stephanie) came to this article having been thinking about my own whiteness and other privileges. As I became more familiar with concepts important to social justice, including power and dominance, I began to explore and reflect on my co-implication in oppressive systems as a privileged body. At this point, I started to question how I call myself an ally while I continue to perpetuate hegemonic systems. For example, I am involved in social justice courses and attempt to interrupt dominant discourse in conversations, but I also use my whiteness and other privileges to take advantage of a system that benefits me. While I have good intentions of being a white ally, I question my role: In what ways am I an ally and in what ways do I perpetuate oppression when trying to be an ally?

My perspective throughout this study is exploring how my role as an ally is inherently complicated by my positionality of power and dominance. When analyzing the data and conceptualizing this article, I asked myself not only what is the ideal role of the ally, but also what am I doing that would indicate I am an ally? It is easy to say I am an ally — it has a nice ring to it. But what I am actually doing to work for social justice still remains questionable. I am a nice person — a nice, privileged person. I believe that from my privileged position it is too easy to commend myself and lose focus on addressing persistent inequities. I believe that I can do better — I *have to* if I want social justice.

### *Ensuring trustworthiness*

Ensuring trustworthiness involves justification for the credibility of a study and acknowledgement of limitations. We engaged strategies, using multiple lenses to validate this study: (1) researcher lens/reflexivity; (2) peer debriefer lens; and (3) participant lens. We collaboratively approached this research process by remaining aware of the data and our positionalities as researchers. We took care to expose experiences, assumptions and beliefs that influenced our interpretations from subordinated positions and positions of dominance.

We enlisted the feedback of peer debriefers to challenge our interpretations and to offer suggestions to enhance the research process. They were asked to read earlier versions of manuscripts, to critique our interpretations, and to recommend revisions. The peer debriefers included two white male scholars and four scholars of color (two African American males, one Latina and one Asian American male), within the field of higher education. These individuals study and teach courses related to social justice issues. Their input helped us to remain reflexive, offered new

ways of conceptualizing the data, and was incorporated into the study. In addition, we invited nine students pursuing doctoral degrees with a social justice emphasis to examine the findings and raise questions regarding the framework, findings, and implications.

We also used member checking to validate this study (Lincoln and Guba 1985). All participants received their transcripts and were provided with an opportunity to clarify and revise them. All revisions were recorded and analysis proceeded from the revised transcripts. In addition, two participants served as a member-checking panel. They read the study and offered their perspectives on the accuracy of the interpretations. We also incorporated their suggestions into the findings.

Our goal throughout was to connect the various aspects of the study in ways that established continuity and made sense. While this study provides insights into some of the thoughts, perspectives and behaviors of white men who are viewed as allies in higher education, there are also limitations. Participants were identified through contacts with peers in the field. Since peers identified them, there was no formal assessment of these men as allies. While nominators spoke highly of them, we are cognizant of the fact that individual perceptions of an ally vary from person to person. Despite the lack of a formal assessment (which was not the ultimate goal of our study), it is useful that their peers identified them as allies for the purposes of this study. Since their peers identified them as allies, our recourse was to trust that they were (and are) engaging in ways that appear to be beyond the status quo of what occurs on campus. Another potential limitation of this study involves the interviewer-interviewee relationships. Since I (Lori) conducted the interviews, participants may or may not have shared information with me that perhaps they might have shared with a white male interviewer for numerous reasons. For example, as we share later, allies often wish to be validated by a person of color. While there is no way of knowing how my identity as a black woman affected the responses, we are cognizant of the possibilities and asked questions in the interview protocol that provided different ways of accessing information from participants.

## Findings

In this section, we highlight three key themes. We use quotes from participants to explain how they made sense of their experiences. At times, particularly in the first theme, we use italics to emphasize salient aspects of participant voices that draw attention to and demonstrate the meanings associated with each theme. It should be noted however, that not all participants' interpretations reflect our conceptions of ally work and in most cases contradict our sense-making through the lenses of our subordinated identities. We invite the readers to examine each theme while reflecting on their personal understandings of ally work.

### *Challenging the status quo*

This theme highlights participants' descriptions of behaviors and actions that they deemed representative of ally work that challenges the status quo. The faculty participants noted that they *challenged the status quo* in the classroom through the topics they cover, their teaching style, and the frameworks that guide their teaching. Several of the professors, such as Jim referenced use of a critical theory framework to guide his course preparation. Using this type of framework, he noted, engenders a "more authentic feeling and commitment toward social justice" as opposed to focusing solely on how he will benefit from a class. He also explained how he desires to have courses that involve "intense discussions" where he is not threatened to engage in "conversations with people who think differently." Jim's quote suggests that he not only saw himself as the instructor, a position latent with power in the classroom, but also envisioned himself as a learner along with the students in his courses. Approaching his course this way was how he disrupted the status quo.

Larry described how he remained conscious of language in the classroom as he worked to create an inclusive environment. He shared, "I work to be conscious of how I present in the classroom and this is not just around race, but this is also sexual identity. I mean we don't talk about husband and wife, we talk about partners. I think we need to be conscious of those subtle things that make people feel uncomfortable." Similarly, in Alex's course on men and masculinity he explained how he worked to create a classroom environment where students were encouraged to engage with issues of sexuality and gender. However the ultimate goal for him was to promote self-exploration. He explained, "I told them, this course is about self-awareness, about getting to know yourself. It is really about who you are. It is a value that I have, [to] teach people to understand themselves better, because I know that is where love, patience ... spring from."

The participants also addressed their disagreement with additive approaches to social justice and the importance of integrating social justice in the classroom. Chip explained:

When I teach my courses, if it is leadership in higher ed, then there is going to be one week that is on leadership and diversity but it is never going to be the only time that I talk about it, because those values and topics should be coming up in every one of the other topics that we talk about throughout the semester. So it is both finding ways to pay special attention to those values and also making sure that everyone understands that they are not stand alone, that they are incorporated in all of the work.

Beyond teaching, several participants discussed the importance of *conducting research* to disrupt the status quo. Kip noted how he situated himself as a researcher, "I wasn't trained as a researcher and then took diversity on, I was trained as a diversity researcher." In another example, Brandon shared how he became interested in

research related to social justice, “I was interested in social justice issues, and I also had a student affairs background and so. . . . I began thinking about what kind of inequities do we see on campuses and how can my dissertation inform those kinds of issues.” He later explained that upon completion of his dissertation, he shared his findings with the institution and “participated in some of the nationwide protests that students at the university led.” While he believed his efforts had some impact, he noted, “it is hard to claim any success there.”

The participants also discussed their efforts toward *getting people to think differently about institutional policies*. For example, Larry shared stories about advocating for the continuation of a position at his institution that was designed to provide leadership opportunities and experiences for scholars of color. He spoke out against a rising movement designed to dismantle the position. Also, Chip and Frank discussed their departmental involvement and their push to have colleagues re-evaluate the use of standardized test scores like the GRE as a determining criterion for admission. Chip explained how GRE scores are used in admissions:

Yeah, the GRE, we know it is correlated with race and ethnicity and we know it is correlated with class . . . gender . . . age . . . and I have colleagues who rant and rave postmodern critical theory and then walk out and say [the student’s] test scores are too low [for admission] . . . and I have to fight that battle at the college level . . . but at the departmental level I am proud of the fact that I have repeatedly pushed to place standardized scores into tertiary consideration.

The experiences of participants also extended into *advocating during hiring situations*. Dylan noted that he tries to be more affirmative during hiring processes, “I felt that we didn’t always do enough to reach out to get more persons of color in the pool, and so I made contact with some people I knew around campus to find out [if they knew] of anyone.” He further talked about finding a candidate who did not have residence hall experience, but possessed transferable skills. Because the candidate did not have “direct” experience, the search committee was reluctant to recommend hiring him. Dylan explained how he rationalized the candidate’s experience to the committee, “He does bring a number of other qualities and things to the job and if we are really saying that we value diversity and individual differences, it just seems that this person has the ability to be an excellent staff member. So we ended up hiring the person and it worked out great.” In this situation, Dylan recruited outside the traditional networks, identified a qualified candidate of color, and advocated despite the resistance he experienced. Dan described a similar hiring situation saying, “I had to do a little homework here with people to open their ideas to the transferable skill things and I think there are really some . . . [ways] our staff team would benefit by having [the candidate of color] as part of this [staff].”

Some of the participants commented on the importance of *examining impact and outcomes* of actions and policies rather than inputs or intents. For example, Frank challenged the college to look at the impact of its admissions decisions when they seemed to unfairly affect the admission of students of color. He stated:

My biggest battle ... has been, excuse my language, the [f'@(\*#&\$n] standardized test for admission, I just hate them. I don't have a lot of regard for them and I have so many who come into the program with low test scores who have done so well ... let's look at [the student's] writing skills and let's look at their motivation, from there we can look at test scores. Plenty of white colleagues say this [score] is too low ... we are not taking [this student] but she got As in all her foundation courses so that means that [she] can write.

There were several other ways in which participants described their engagement in social justice projects. Brandon participated in a campus initiative related to unionization for faculty and graduate students. Jim brings conversations about social justice issues to the dinner table in everyday discussions with his family. Dan and Frank mentioned that some of their work is done by opening doors for students based on the student's interests. Frank went into more detail about how he works with individual students; he supports their interests and use of marginalized sources such as the *Journal of Negro Education*. Frank also talked about how he questions the common knowledge constructions of things, such as the importance placed on being a physician and what it means to be professional. In this way, he believes he is bringing attention to socially constructed standards (based largely on white middle-class norms) and how they are used as comparisons or benchmarks that students (and others) often aspire to achieve and then challenges the students to consider possibilities of a different standard.

In addition to hearing from participants about going against the grain or challenging the status quo, there were numerous times they described actions limited to involvement with individual people rather than challenging the status quo carried out through institutions or systems. They all discussed their interactions with racially minoritized students. Kip described his strategy for working with minoritized students, "One of the biggest things is that I listen and acknowledge and when there is a chance for me to do something I don't necessarily shy away from them, but first is just listening and acknowledging." Chad recalled a situation when he helped a student:

[A student] came in my office and he was pretty upset [because] he was trying to buy books and he had a stipend ... that was going to come to him through financial aid and when he went to buy his books ... the stipend hadn't come ... and he came to

my office and he was really upset as you would imagine and we talked for a while ... at some point in the conversation, I remember thinking is this going to be good idea, and I thought I might regret this later. I think the books were like \$150.00, and I said "Let's go down there and I will buy the books and when you get your stipend and stuff, you pay me back, but I don't want you to leave here today without your books."

Many participants mentioned that *helping marginalized students* was important but rarely discussed specific ways that they interacted with or negotiated relationships with these students. However, Frank did share that working with racially minoritized students involved understanding them as individuals as well as their cultural background. He said it was important to know "[where they are in their social identity development] at a point in time that I am working with them. I try to figure out what doors I can open and. ... I do some ... sponsoring of career interests." Working with minoritized students in particular gave the participants a sense of pride and accomplishment. They expressed sentiments similar to Chip who stated, "I do find it very gratifying that a lot of the students of color come to me to be their adviser."

The participants expressed several instances that *they* perceived as reflective of ally work. This could involve how they approached teaching and research, student advising support, or voicing their perspective in hiring situations. It also involved talking with family members about social justice issues.

### *Reflections on the risks and sacrifices of ally work*

The second theme focuses on the risks and sacrifices of ally work, particularly its paradoxical nature. We identified this paradox as participants explained that at no point had they experienced consequences resulting from allyship. Several mentioned that within their organizational units (departments, offices), diversity and social justice work was appreciated. Brandon said he works "where those [social justice] issues are not really marginalized." Similarly, Dylan shared, "Organizations that I have worked for have valued folks being involved in diversity issues." Both quotes suggest that these participants may perceive a cultural ethos within their organizations that values social justice, thus not much risk or sacrifice is readily necessary in such settings.

Although a few participants described uncomfortable situations when they tried to engage someone in a discussion about a social justice related issue, they were unable to recall any real challenges or sacrifices, and as a result felt as if they were not doing enough to be considered allies. Dylan indicated, "Sometimes I feel as if I should be doing more, or at any point, I can just walk away from things and there are no negative consequences for me." Similarly, Bryce expressed, "I am probably

not being a strong enough ally because if I was noticing negative impact ... doing work as assertively as I feel that I should be, then I would have more people pissed off at me. I would have more sanctions probably handed out.” Dylan and Brandon indicate that their construction of being allies involves sacrifice, difficulties, and the inability to conveniently excuse oneself from conflict and pushback from others. Because they were not involved in efforts that prompted these experiences, they seemed less confident about whether they really were allies.

Given the lack of sacrifice involved for the participants, it appeared paradoxical that they were not engaged in more risk taking activities. Stuart expressed, “I don’t think that I have in any way suffered from being an ally, I don’t see it.” Notably, after Stuart mentioned he had not experienced any sacrifices, he continued with the following description of a job interview

I remember this one time ... [at] an interview ... [I saw] a good friend of mine and he is an openly gay man ... and I gave him a hug, well I noticed the people around the room giving me this look that is like, “Why are you hugging a gay male?” and I didn’t get that job, and I don’t think it was the main reason but I did note afterwards that maybe I shouldn’t have hugged him.

Stuart’s experience suggests that once he took what he considered to be a risk (publicly hugging a gay man), it resulted in negative consequences; but that was the extent to which he had experienced difficulties associated with being an ally.

Some participants discussed their lack of risk taking, as they saw others assume greater risks. Jim explained, “I haven’t been put into a position where it feels like a tremendous sacrifice, and there are times when I feel guilt about it, because I know there are people who are taking a lot more risks than I do.” While he did not pay a price, Jim wondered if his fellow colleague, an African American male could say the same thing. Kip made a distinction between his work as a white ally and the consequences for people of color doing social justice work:

I think I probably get rewarded as much as I get any questions about my doing this work, and I don’t know because I can’t tell, but I don’t think there have been any penalties or sacrifices yet, and I can see that in stark contrast to other people that are people not in the white male group. ... I have talked to other young faculty and graduate students who are African American or Latino ... there are real sacrifices to them, they have to fight the battle on whether their research is valid ... because I am white does my diversity research have any more credibility than somebody else?

Kip’s comments relate to another paradox for white men engaged in ally work; despite little sacrifice, they accumulate rewards and recognition as an ally. Jim discussed that by virtue of being a white man some people do not immediately perceive



him as an ally, but when they learn of his interests in doing social justice work he receives automatic rewards. Bryce also indicated, “I think at some level in ... student affairs we reward people in positions of privilege who get it [social justice] or at least purport to get it.”

A few participants noted that the biggest potential issues they faced were that doing ally work could have consequences for tenure, thus Kip reinforced the importance of being strategic and choosing his battles wisely. Another potential consequence was that marginalized groups might be suspicious of their intentions. Participants also discussed being perceived as lacking the necessary credibility to conduct research on race and ethnicity issues. Larry shared:

I think there are often questions such as “Why is a white guy doing that work?” and ... for anybody who does work in the area of race, there is a devaluing of that work in my mind, at least in some instances ... but I don’t know if there is a real cost to that [for me].

The reflections of these participants suggest that for white men, ally work involves “doing” and if they are not engaged in the doing, it becomes increasingly difficult to consider oneself an ally. Their reflections also reveal interesting paradoxes. The first paradox is that for white men, ally work involves minimal risk that is acknowledged with great rewards. The second paradox is that ally work involves few sacrifices, yet some white men do not actively involve themselves in social justice struggles.

### *Aspiring to be an ally...*

In this theme, we explain participants’ understandings regarding what it means to be an ally and engage in ally work versus simply being nice white men. Their comments indicated that being an ally is an aspirational journey that is never fully realized and a process wrought with mistakes. While some participants chose to disengage from the difficult aspects of ally work, or settle into the comfort and rewards of being perceived as allies (without necessarily having acted as allies); others attempted to grapple with the tensions between simply being nice and consciously embracing ally work.

As Kip discussed whether he viewed himself as an ally, he stated, “That is a goal of mine and for some groups on some days, I think I do pretty well and for other groups on other days, I might not do as well.” He later stated:

I am taking an approach and generally it is an imperfect approach ... my own understanding and methods are lacking in their complexity, the issue needs something more but I can’t get there yet. I think it is important to be doing the work whether it is flawed or not ... but hopefully over time it will be getting better. ... I will be getting closer to the goals of being an ally for a lot of different groups.

Kip's quote reveals his aspiration to be an ally, but also highlights the situational nature of ally work.

Jim was acutely aware of the tensions that emerged between wanting to be perceived as a "good" person and being an ally. On one hand he wants to be an ally and on the other, he sees why thinking of himself as an ally only recenters his privileges and moves him further away from his ally aspirations. His words alluded to an inherent tension when he said:

I would like to think of myself as one [an ally], but. ... I think there is an irony with this in my own experience. The more that I think of myself as one, the more I kind of get comfortable, so I really try not to think of myself as one because I think ego gets involved. It is almost like I become a "good one," whatever that is, a good man, a good white guy, a good heterosexual, and I believe that gets in the way of learning and passion for doing social justice work. So in a way I am saying I am an ally, but I am not comfortable with that, because. ... I may become patronizing if I label myself that way, but I would say I generally *aspire* [emphasis added] to be.

However, some of the participants' words suggested that they were sometimes comfortable with being perceived as allies, whether they were heavily engaged in ally work or not. Bryce noted, he was able to "talk the talk pretty well, but when it comes to walking the talk, could be doing more, should be doing more." Bryce also discussed his desire to "be more clear ... less conflicted or compromised" about his commitment to being an ally. Being perceived as a nice white guy and ally afforded him the opportunity to excuse himself from ally work when it was convenient. He shared, "I sort of let myself off the hook. ... I say I am so busy. ... I have to get done. ... I don't have a lot of time to do all this other stuff ... but that is an ongoing tension that I struggle with."

One way to handle the tensions between being nice and being an ally was to view them as synonymously linked or characteristics that defined their personhood. This dynamic was especially intriguing given that some participants toggled back and forth between expressing a keen sense of critical consciousness while simultaneously displaying a lack of consciousness. Alex noted, "I am an ally, but I think it is who I am and it has taken a lot of hard work and I don't know if I would label myself as an ally, as much as I would say that I am trying to become a loving person, who cares deeply about people." Another participant, Larry, said, "The process, I guess it becomes part of who I am. I realize the inequities, the unfairness, the discrimination that occurs. I guess it becomes like a conviction to me. ... I certainly don't want to be part of that process. ... It comes from that type of underlying conviction rather than something I consciously daily think about ... It is more like 'I'm just being who I am now.'"

## Discussion and implications

There are many ways for allies to do social justice work (O'Brien 2001). This work may take many shapes and have different roles depending on positionalities, passions, power, and choices. Some allies get involved in community organizations, some march in protests, some use discretionary power to allocate resources and to involve marginalized persons in meaningful ways. Our findings reveal, the men in this study found different ways to enact their beliefs in social justice — namely through research, teaching, advising/mentoring students, advocating during hiring practices and speaking out against some institutional policies.

### *Working at the individual level*

While there are many roles that allies can play, our participants relegated much of their work toward helping students and addressing issues of inequity in individual circumstances, such as incorporating diversity in course planning (Charbeneau 2013). Similarly, “most white allies at the collegiate level have incorporated readings on equity methodologies and include discussion of social justice issues in their courses” (Boutte and Jackson 2014, 6). Attention to individual occurrences is worthwhile, but futile if efforts do not address overarching inequities. Asher (2007, 66) stated, “both the microprocesses of resistance on the part of individuals and communities and larger, systemic movements ... are integral to our progress toward equity and justice.” In other words, the participants viewed themselves as working toward social justice in the situations they chose, but such efforts become negligible if they do not disrupt structural inequities. The participants' lack of action in larger social justice projects reflects how they exercised the absolute right to exclude. They engaged in ally related work on a micro-level, leaving larger issues unaddressed.

In discussing the role of male allies involved with sexual assault prevention, Edwards (2006, 46) wrote “Good intentions are admirable and certainly helpful on an individual level, but unless [the ally] also recognizes the institutional and societal levels of support for violence against women he will be limited in his effectiveness as an ally and may even unknowingly be engaging in sexist behavior himself without realizing it.” While the participants expressed an awareness of institutional and societal level inequities, their ally work was still situated largely at an individual level. There certainly is plenty of room for various types of allies, yet it is disconcerting if ally work is limited to individual instances. Moreover individual acts may result in fueling hegemony (the act of excluding).

Although people in Western society are often taught to privilege the personal, there is an even greater need to be aware of how oppression operates at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels (Bishop 2002; EACCW 2005; Kendall 2006).

If most ally work is geared toward addressing individual instances of oppression, how can systemic power and dominance ever be fully disrupted? Kivel (2002) also warned that allies often get focused on individual actions rather than addressing institutional, systemic oppression and urged white allies in particular to become involved in questioning the status quo through analyzing decisions and policies that have broader consequences. He contended that addressing institutional inequities is necessary for any substantial transformation of current oppressive institutions and systems. Until institutional and structural inequities are addressed, the status quo remains intact and the benefits accrued by whiteness continue to unfold.

### *The attractiveness of individual level ally work*

Perhaps moving beyond individual acts would require garnering a deeper sense of why working at an individual level is attractive. There are several reasons that may prompt white male allies to get involved in individual situations rather than systemic change processes. As noted by the participants, there are more immediate, visible rewards that stem from individual situations. There are also opportunities to receive positive feedback from people, particularly minoritized groups. Some of the participants indicated that it was gratifying to receive accolades or to be selected by students of color to serve in an advisory capacity, which is reflective of Crowfoot and Chesler's (2003) contention that some white men tend to seek approval from minoritized groups. Individual involvement requires less work and risk-taking, thus increasing their attractiveness. Using a CRT lens, the white men in this study, through participation in individual acts, exercised their rights to reputation and status property. Rarely were their intentions questioned with regard to doing ally work because they were white men. Moreover, they were presumed to be allies based upon their ability to "talk the talk." Their rights to reputation and status property also provided credibility because they were perceived to be men who "get it." It is important to note that participants benefitted from this form of property because given their societal standing, they are neither expected nor forced to engage in understanding ally work. However, because they were among very few in their institutions who at least tried, the level of respect they received was significantly higher. Being white men provided some privileges, but being white men who could articulate and understand those privileges, when they did not have to, was further beneficial and increased their credibility. These contradictions and paradoxes reflect Yoon's (2012) concept of "whiteness-at-work" in which, privilege shrouds efforts toward critical action. In discussing white people and antiracism, Thompson (2003, 12) captured this phenomenon, "The very acknowledgement of our racism and privilege can be turned to our advantage."

Working on an individual level can also be reflective of interest convergence. An interest convergence where dominant group members either get their needs met (rewards, accolades, immediate results) or do not have to do much work (no risk-taking, little complexity) is much more likely to result in support of or concessions for minoritized persons. This means that if changing institutional systems of oppression has high barriers and little perceived benefit to dominant group members, they are much less likely to become involved. Even more telling is that when dominant group members get involved at the institutional level, they can simply walk away, particularly when their own interests are threatened as one participant noted. Their property rights in whiteness serve as a resource that can be used at their discretion, meaning they can enjoy the benefits of being in a position to contribute to social justice efforts until their personal interests are no longer served.

We are not suggesting that white men should not have needs or self-interests. Indeed, we encourage them as well as members of other dominant groups to assess their needs and be truthful with themselves. For example is their need to contribute to decision making in social justice efforts or is it to control the decision-making process and subsequent outcomes? White men and other dominant group members should be mindful of how their needs are articulated and communicated, as well as the extent to which those needs are perceived as maintaining or disrupting the status quo. The findings around the role of whiteness as property and interest convergence raise the question of how often white male allies in higher education are what Edwards (2006) would classify as *allies for social justice*. It also suggests that many who are perceived as allies may be best described as *allies for altruism* who while engaging in social justice related activities fail to implicate themselves in systems of oppression and by doing so perpetuate the same systems because they place more emphasis on activities in which they are willing to engage, rather than acting for substantive change (Thompson 2003).

### *Helping and the intent vs impact dilemma*

Another observation was the aspect of “helping” which was identified by some of the allies as part of their roles. While some of the allies did not specifically use the word help or talk about helping, about half of them referred to helping in some manner. Many of the allies wanted to *help* students transition to their roles on campus, *help* minoritized people get hired, *help* graduate students do research, and *help* colleagues combat oppression in their respective departments. In considering this process of helping through a lens of CRT, the tenet that racism is endemic becomes relevant. This tenet suggests that the ubiquitous power of whiteness is likely affecting not only overtly racist people and those oblivious to race but well-intentioned

individuals as well. Because racism is endemic, allies and others who are interested in furthering social justice must pay attention to power dynamics inherent in relationships across race and other social identity groups. In their “Key Model,” Scott and Robinson (2001) indicated that white men are socialized to remain in control (Scott and Robinson 2001). This sense of control could translate into the use of property rights in whiteness, particularly the right to exclude. White men who attempt to be allies may focus more on controlling a situation or taking the lead (under the guise of helping) rather than taking a backseat and creating space for minoritized persons to establish a sense of agency. When property rights to exclude are used, minoritized persons are ultimately removed from the lead role of establishing agency, making their own decisions, and writing their own journey. Although individual men may not feel powerful or in control, allies and others working for social justice must consider the power inherent in their relationships in order to work towards disrupting it.

Based on the information shared by participants, it is not evident that they forcefully exerted control over minoritized persons with whom they interacted in the context of helping (though their positions as white male faculty and administrators presumes a status of power), but it is highly possible that control and power in efforts to “help” can become problematic and antithetical to social justice. The participants did speak about working with students to help them succeed but did not disclose the methods that they used to address the power inequities in their relationships or strategies they used to promote agency. This question about negotiating power dynamics in cross-identity relationships is ripe for future study.

Although people often help because they feel it is a good thing to do, there is another perspective to consider. First, someone who is in a position to help is often perceived as helping someone who is in need. This can be translated easily into a dominant narrative that connotes students and faculty of color, for example, as needing help because they are incapable of succeeding on their own. This type of helping is remedial (and paternalistic) rather than genuinely supportive, respectful and empowering. Within a dominant system guided by meritocratic values, perceiving marginalized persons as needing help serves to reify a position of superiority for allies who already possess power and maintains oppression of minoritized persons (Bloom and Kilgore 2003; Edwards 2006).

Individuals who regard minoritized persons as deficient and needing help undermine alliances, particularly when those in more dominant positions determine that in order for minoritized people to be successful they need to be taught the ways of the dominant group (or how to get through the system). Thus the erroneous assumption is that if minoritized persons behave in ways similar to the dominant group, they will be equally successful. Such an assumption is accurate in the sense that

minoritized groups may experience success more easily if they refrain from challenging dominant ideologies and behaviors; yet it does not account for how success is defined, nor does it acknowledge the sacrifices of one's own culture and beliefs that must be made in order to fully embrace dominant thinking and stock definitions of success. Furthermore the contributions of historically rooted systems of oppression that impact the successes of minoritized people remain largely ignored. Higher education faculty and staff often recognize that there is a power hierarchy inherent in faculty/student relationships, thus, the nuances of how allies position themselves and think of their work as allies cannot be ignored. Crowfoot and Chesler (2003, 364) noted, "attempts to re-impose the dominant white culture on people of color, under the guise of helping them, may simply lead to cultural confusion and resistance." An alternative for allies instead of "helping" minoritized people is finding ways to stand next to them, follow their lead, and work collaboratively.

### *What ally work is and isn't*

The participants purposefully connected with marginalized persons on campus, helped students negotiate the system, and addressed issues of inequity in their courses/departments. Basically, the instances they shared were not necessarily unique or different from what most nice people would do. These are important efforts, but of interest in this study is what does this mean for how ally roles are constructed and perceived? There is the potential for whiteness to function as a normalizing tool for how we think about ally work. According to McWhorter (2005), "Racism [and other isms] can function quite well in the absence of any identifiable racists" (536). If white men who are perceived to be allies are doing the things that most nice people do, what makes their actions appear to be socially just? This question is at the heart of ally work and prompts the need for a viable framework that moves beyond labeling who allies are to focus more on what allies do.

Participants identified common niceties such as building relationships, listening to students, and being a mentor as ally behavior. Does this mean that being an ally requires little struggle with the status quo? Kivel (2007) indicated that allies should find themselves in contentious relationships with those in power. Contentious relationships with power could have shown up in the form of consequences such as confronting powerful decision-makers and being questioned when they posed suggestions conflicting with the status quo. Although participants performed many important actions, most troubling was the finding that they were not experiencing any sacrifices as a result of their work. Further, no participant mentioned any contentious relationships with power. Thus, it appears that the work in which participants engaged is more reflective of "nice guy" activities that do not necessarily challenge the status quo.

### *The act of co-implication*

Those who aspire to be allies occupy an inherently complicated position. While trying to support social justice from a position of power without perpetuating domination, they must continually be reflexive about their positionality. Participants noted that being an ally is a process in which mistakes, contradictions, and tensions occurred; thus they aspired to do better. Most participants mentioned their privileged status, but rarely did they disclose their own participation in oppressive behaviors. They spoke about oppressive systems as if they were entities separate from themselves and rarely acknowledged their positionality within the system. For example, in discussing white racism, Thompson (2003, 8) explained, "Although we [white people] can acknowledge white racism as a generic fact, it is hard to acknowledge as a fact about ourselves."

Co-implication, as defined by Mohanty (1990, 2003), signifies that current experiences must be contextualized within history and through each person's role within operating systems of power. Kip was one of few who acknowledged his positionality while involved in campus networks with faculty and staff of color. Kip mentioned that he would have to work harder to develop relationships with faculty of color given the context of his department and school. He also articulated the complexities of being an ally, "I feel I have to be as wise as possible about picking times where I need to be the person that is out there saying important [things] and when I need to be the person in the background giving support." His articulation of this complexity honors three key things; the historical dominance of white men, the desire to be supportive rather than controlling, and the complicated reality that sometimes the voices of white men are heard above any other group. It is obvious that Kip did not want to shy away from responsibly co-implicating himself. Other participants talked about how they conducted themselves as allies, but not about their positionality in ally work.

Dominant group members who are working towards social justice need awareness of their positionalities of power inherent in ally work. They should acknowledge power dynamics in relationships and institutions that affect their work, while remaining reflexive about how hegemonic systems can impede efforts toward social justice or pull them into perpetuating the very oppression that they seek to redress. Some of this awareness can come from minoritized individuals from whom they feel would offer genuine advice about the ways they enact and disrupt power (Boutte and Jackson 2014).

### **Future research**

We took a critical interpretivist approach to examine how white men described their experiences and ways in which they believed they were engaged in ally work.



Our findings suggest that much work remains in terms of their ally journeys and moving from a nice white guy to one whose actions are more reflective of ally work. “White men who wish to be involved in multicultural coalitions ... have much to learn about [their] own whiteness, maleness, and other bases of privilege” (Crowfoot and Chesler 2003, 375). Future research should be directed more in depth at white men’s construction of ally work. Additionally, since these allies discussed being allies by helping individual people, it is important to know more about barriers they see in addressing institutional and systemic factors. For those who are making substantial social change by going against the grain or challenging the status quo, what accounts for their success and what prompts them to be engaged in that way? Future research should also examine the actual processes that white men use to reflexively co-implicate themselves in systems of oppression. Another avenue of research would be to examine the language of being an ally and the social construction of the word “ally.” Moreover, it would be worthwhile to interrogate how ally status is conferred. Is it okay for individuals to call themselves allies? Is this a role conferred by others? Who makes the decision regarding who is or is not an ally? Future research should focus on the role of expanding the discourses surrounding white privilege, specifically the benefits of further situating ally work within a deeper understanding of white supremacy. Leonardo (2004, 138) suggests:

A critical look at white privilege ... must be complemented by an equally rigorous examination of white supremacy. ... Although the two processes are related, the conditions of white supremacy make white privilege possible ... as such ... white racial supremacy revolves less around the issue of unearned advantages ... and more around direct processes that secure dominations and the privileges associated with it.

Finally, more research should be devoted to examining the role of whiteness in coalition-building, particularly the potential for such coalitions to experience success even when the contradictory nature of whiteness remains intact. Quijada Cerecer (2010) has begun this work to examine whiteness and re-envision partnerships and opportunities that produce “educative moments of conflict and coalition that exist outside the binary of failure or success” (174).

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the literature about social justice allies. We examined how white male faculty and administrators attempted ally work. The review literature and CRT helped with interpreting the dynamics involved with being an ally. In responding to the question, “What right do I have to do this work?” allies will need to find ways to monitor and control how they enact their power when working in these roles. The findings illuminate the ways that individual acts are perceived

to be reflective of ally work despite their failure to change systems. They also caution leaders in higher education to move beyond the individual levels and attend to multiple forms of oppression, institutionally and systemically.

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